PEOPLE DISRUPTED

Doing Mission Responsibly among Refugees and Migrants

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North Korean Migrants in South Korea: How Can the Korean Church Best Serve Them?

Ben Torrey

In this chapter I provide a brief look at the experience of North Korean migrants who have come to South Korea with the expectation of settling there. It is based on my experience, study, and research from 2003 to the present. During this time I have worked with these migrants as presenters, consultants, and participants in a number of educational, religious, and social settings, including personal interactions and interviews. I have also continuously tracked the situation of North Korean migrants in South Korea through the news media, journal articles, and other means.

In April 2007 I made a ten-day trip to North Korea with Christian Friends of Korea (www.cfk.org), an NGO, and from the beginning of September to mid-December 2008 I worked in North Korea as a food distribution monitor for a US food aid program. During this time, as a member of a team covering seventeen counties in North Pyongan Province, I worked with North Korean officials and visited numerous homes and institutions in various cities, towns, villages, and collective farms. This responsibility provided many opportunities for conversations and discussions with local officials and residents. During that period, I also made trips to Chagang Province and to the capital, Pyongyang. These experiences in North Korea were extremely

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valuable for deepening my understanding of the differences between the worldviews, culture, expectations, and society of North and South Korea. They all gave me a greater sense of the context that North Korean migrants find themselves in, in the South, especially as they compare their experiences before and after migration.

Rather than being an academic research work based on rigorous interviewing standards that focuses on a specific concern, this chapter presents what I have learned from the above exposure to North Korea, augmented by direct interviews with seven emigrants of various backgrounds and ages (ranging from fifteen to forty-seven years old) who have settled in South Korea. The fundamental question I seek to answer is, What is the church's responsibility toward these migrants, and how might it better carry out that responsibility?

Throughout this chapter, except where the official political terms are appropriate, I refer to the familiar "North Korea" and "South Korea," not the official political designations (respectively, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK, and Republic of Korea, ROK). Also, I refer mainly to "migrant," not "refugee" or "defector" (*talbuk ja* or *talbuk min*), though in a few cases "refugee" is appropriate for individuals who have fled from North Korea and have not yet made a decision whether to migrate elsewhere.

BASIC FACTS AND STATISTICS

A review of some key statistics will provide a general picture of the severe difficulties facing North Koreans who are successful in emigrating to South Korea.

Number of migrants. ROK Ministry of Unification figures released on November 13, 2016, showed that a total of 30,005 North Koreans had arrived in South Korea since the end of the Korean War.[1] Large numbers of North Koreans began arriving in South Korea during the late 1990s because of famine in the North. Of these, 71 percent were women, a figure that was expected to rise to 80 percent by the end of 2016.

Statistics concerning the total number of migrants leaving

1. Yi Whan-woo, "Seoul Bolsters Efforts to Embrace Defectors," *Korea Times*, November 22, 2016, 5.

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North Korea over the past twenty years vary significantly, running anywhere from 100,000 to 300,000, with some sources, such as official Chinese estimates, as low as 10,000 (in 2010), which is clearly unrealistic, considering that, by the end of 2009, close to 18,000 North Koreans had arrived in South Korea alone.[2] Many of those who left North Korea returned, many continue to live in China, for the most part illegally, and a much smaller number have migrated to Russia, Europe, or the United States, either directly from North Korea or from China or (in a few cases) South Korea.

Employment. Many sources and personal accounts indicate that North Koreans in South Korea frequently move from job to job, not staying very long in any one position, whether as an employee or as the owner of a small business. It is believed that nearly 40 percent of North Korean migrants are currently unemployed. A significant number of those who have left jobs or are currently not seeking employment give health issues as the primary reason.[3] In 2012, according to the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 47.3 percent of North Koreans ages 20–29 living in South Korea were not economically active, compared with 39.4 percent of South Koreans in the same age group.[4]

Education. North Koreans of all levels of education have a difficult time either transferring their North Korean education to the South Korean context or catching up to South Korean grade levels

2. Courtland Robinson, "North Korea: Migration Patterns and Prospects," NAPSNet Special Report, November 4, 2010, nautilus.org/napsnet-speical-reports/north-korea-migration-patterns-and-prospects. "North Korean Defectors," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Korean_defectors; cited as "Bukhanitaljumin Huynhwang" [Status of North Korean defectors], Ministry of Unification. Resettlement Support Division.

3. Elizabeth Shim, "North Korea Defectors' Health Issues Obstacles to Employment, Seoul Says," UPI, September 22, 2016, www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/09/22/North-Korea-defectors-health-issues-obstacle-to-employment-Seoul-says/4871474567942.

4. Go Myong-Hyun, "Resettling in South Korea: Challenges for Young North Korean Refugees," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Issue Briefs, August, 2014, 9, http://en.asaninst.org/contents/resettling-in-south-korea-challenges-for-young-north-korean-refugees/.

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or standards. Professionals in the fields of medicine and engineering have found that skills and certifications acquired in the North are either obsolete or do not measure up to South Korean standards. They need to gain further education and new certifications. Primary and secondary students face additional problems in that their education in the North in recent years has been substandard because of the virtual collapse of the North Korean societal infrastructure. They have also suffered because of the migration process itself, spending time, often in hiding, in China and traveling to South Korea. North Korean migrant students in South Korea have a school dropout rate of as much as six times the national average.[5] Middle and high school students, often in their twenties, attend some of the numerous alternative schools focused on migrants. I know of four such alternative schools.

Health. Because of the near starvation across North Korea in the late 1990s and chronic poor nutrition or malnutrition in the years since, the average body weight and height of North Koreans are considerably less than those of their South Korean peers: for boys, 11.1 kg lighter in weight and 10.1 cm shorter in height; for girls, 3.8 kg less in weight and 7.2 cm in height.[6] Both tuberculosis and hepatitis are serious health problems in North Korea, and many migrants leave the country already infected with one or both of these diseases. In addition, female migrants often experience human trafficking and sexual slavery or assault in China, resulting in not only trauma, but also a high incidence of sexually transmitted disease.[7]

The incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is very high among North Koreans because of their having endured famine, witnessing family members die from starvation, witnessing public executions and violence, experiencing violence and torture, human trafficking, and a host of other traumas. Practitioners report that 30 percent of migrants suffer from PTSD.[8]

5. Ibid., 7.

6. Ibid., 3.

7. These comments are based on numerous conversations with health care givers and educators working with North Koreans in South Korea, knowledge of individual migrants, and comments by NGO staff involved in humanitarian assistance both to North Korea and to migrants in China and South Korea.

8. Go Myong-Hyun, "Resettling in South Korea," 5–6; Jin-Heon Jung,

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Suicide. According to the World Health Organization, South Korea has the second highest rate of suicide in the world and the highest rate among OECD countries.[9] In September 2015 a South Korean news report stated that the suicide rate among North Korean migrants was 15.2 percent, which was "about three times the national average."[10] Many reasons are given for this sad figure—despair at separation from loved ones and longing for home that is so near yet impossible to reach, chronic inability to gain meaningful employment, with accompanying economic distress, loss of children during the passage through China, stresses of trying to adapt to a culture that is more different than expected, along with ill health and psychological trauma. There are other reasons as well, each one an individual tragedy.[11]

THE CHURCH AND MIGRANTS ON THE MOVE—CHINA

One frequently hears that some 80 percent of refugees escaping to China from North Korea become Christians; that is, they choose to associate with missionaries and churches and are likely to profess conversion and seek baptism.[12] For those who settle in South Korea, however, only 10–20 percent actually attend church on a regular basis. Many reasons are given for this disparity. Perhaps the most frequently observed is that conversion is viewed simply as part of the process of getting from North Korea to South Korea rather than as a truly life-changing event.

Migration and Religion in East Asia: North Korean Migrants' Evangelical Encounters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

9. "Suicide in South Korea," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_in_South_Korea.

10. Elizabeth Shim, "More North Korean Defectors Report Dissatisfaction with Life in South," UPI, September 9, 2015, www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/09/09/More-North-Korean-defectors-report-dissatisfaction-with-life-in-South/4301441810531.

11. I have heard of several incidents of mothers being separated from children, going back to China to find them, without success, and subsequently taking their own lives. At the same time, I know several people who were successfully united after years of separation.

12. My comments in this section are based on years of interaction with North Korean migrants in South Korea, numerous news reports and papers, and conversations with teachers, pastors, and others ministering to or caring for migrants.

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